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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #1331/01 2341709
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221709Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7229
INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 4496
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 2146
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3359
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UNCLAS RABAT 001331

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION BEGINS WITH
SUCCESSFUL PRE-ASSESSMENT

REF: RABAT 1249

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The organization of Morocco's first-ever international election observation kicked off with a week-long pre-election assessment mission organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). In meetings with embassy and an August 15 press conference, the delegation recognized positive developments in the electoral environment, but noted several concerns, including declining public confidence in political institutions and recent challenges to press freedoms. They noted the need for transparent reporting of election results, which now may be addressed by a German-funded NGO focused on that part of the process. The assessors also urged the GOM to provide formal credentials and clear guidance to election officials on the role of observers; the absence of such has been complicated since the Human Rights Consultative Council (CCDH) is the GOM lead, with the Interior Ministry clearly on board, but abjuring any formal, documentary verification. POL followed up with MOI elections chief who assured us that CCDH has all the needed authorities. Japan, Canada, the Netherlands also have signed up to join the 40-50 international observers expected September 3-10. Despite some initial problems, the productive visit of the assessment mission appears to bode well for a successful observation. End Summary.

¶2. (U) From August 8-15, a MEPI-funded international pre-election assessment team, organized by NDI, visited Morocco to examine the political environment surrounding the September 7 legislative ballot. The team was briefed by Ambassador Riley on August 10, including information on USG support for the elector effort. The team met with government officials, election authorities, political party leaders, civil society actors, and media. The delegation wrapped up their visit with a press conference, and released a report outlining their findings accompanied by a comprehensive list of recommendations for Moroccan authorities and political parties.

¶3. (U) At their August 15 press conference and previously in meetings with embassy, the five-member team, led by Irish Senator Frances Fitzgerald, highlighted a number of recent positive developments in the electoral environment:

issue-based campaigning, incorporation of voter interests into party platforms, aggressive voter registration and civic education efforts, and impressive administrative election preparations on the part of the GOM. The upcoming elections offer an important opportunity to deepen the process of democratization in Morocco, they said.

¶4. (U) The delegation also noted the evident and potentially alarming trend of declining confidence in political institutions, which has made turnout a major issue. Given the mechanics of the electoral law, and gerrymandering earlier in the year, there could also be a significant disconnect between the popular vote totals by political parties and their resulting representation in parliament, they explained. Recent challenges to press freedoms were also a concern. They suggested that after the election, the ensuing government and parliament should be given additional capacities to increase citizen investment in Morocco's democratic development. They expect the full observation mission may elaborate on these recommendations in its post-election final report.

¶5. (U) The team's principal recommendations included: impartial enforcement of campaigning regulations, free and fair access to the media and campaigning, and publication of official election results in a timely and transparent manner. Concerning the planned international observation, they asked for clear guidelines from the government to local polling stations concerning the prerogatives of international and domestic observers, and universally recognized credentials for observers to help ensure appropriate access. CCDH has undertaken to provide this, but something formal from MOI would be reassuring.

¶6. (U) On August 15, before the press conference, delegation members met with the UNDP and local donor community to share their impressions and analysis of the week-long mission. The credibility of Morocco's election will rest on the rate of voter participation and this is understood across the board, they said. Despite allegations of vote buying and other improper campaigning techniques, the team does not anticipate flagrant irregularities on Election Day. The delegation also stressed the important role that political party observers play in the overall credibility of elections, and reported that most major parties have structures in place to cover a large percentage of the country's polling stations. In total, there will be over 35,000 polling stations throughout Morocco on September 7.

¶7. (U) Our German colleagues told the meeting that the Democracy Reporting International (DRI) project discussed reftel has been fully supported and funded by the German Foreign Ministry. At the moment it appears that DRI, in close coordination with NDI, will send out 2 experts from September 1-14 to participate in the monitoring of the vote count and publication of results. UNDP also reports that it has received authorization to fund CCDH's evaluation component. In addition to the Canadians, Dutch, and Irish, Japan has also confirmed their intention to contribute to the NDI international election observation mission, which will visit Morocco from 3-10 September at the invitation of the CCDH. NDI is still working on its roster of potential observers, but it already has technical staff in place preparing for the logistics and other aspects of observer deployment.

¶8. (U) On August 10, following our initial contact with the assessment mission, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staffer Perry Cammack and Polcouns heard from MOI Director of Elections Hassan Aghmari that a decree or other formal published instructions allowing election observers to enter polling and counting stations was not needed, nor would it be legal. In this instance, the King, in his statutory role as Head of State, empowered the CCDH to coordinate monitoring and set procedures and rules. He tasked the MOI with implementing the CCDH's instructions - which Aghmari said it has done. Despite the absence of written permission, monitors would experience no obstacles, he said. All members

and levels of the electoral system have received explicit instructions from the MOI and will cooperate with the observation effort. As an added measure, the MOI has set up a hotline for people to report voting issues. Unlike elections in Morocco's not-to-distant past, the MOI is no longer an "active participant," but an impartial facilitator. We nevertheless urged MOI to publish or provide the observers/CCDH with some written authorization or at least a copy of its written instructions to election officials.

Comment

19. (SBU) Press coverage to date has cast the assessment team's visit and report in a positive light, reflecting the common view we hear from contacts around the country that international observers are welcomed and favorable for Morocco,s international image. Despite initial foot-dragging by the MOI, the ease in which the assessment mission operated during its week-long mission appears to bode well for the international observation mission. End Comment.

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